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## At the Hands of Becky Sharp: (In)Visible Manipulation and *Vanity Fair*

Peter J. Capuano  
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'You've got more brains in your little vinger than any baronet's wife in the county.'

—Sir Pitt Crawley to Becky Sharp, *Vanity Fair* (152).

Victorian sartorial convention allowed for the routine inspection of only two body parts: the head and the hands. While it is well-documented that the perceptual codes of phrenology and physiognomy shaped psychological, aesthetic and fictional conventions by the middle of the nineteenth century, the hand has attracted relatively little attention.<sup>1</sup> One would be hard-pressed, for example, to identify a critic of *Vanity Fair* who does *not* comment on the relationship between Becky Sharp's facial expressions and the pervasiveness of her manipulative temperament. However, even within the heavily sifted topic of "manipulation" in *Vanity Fair*, critics have overlooked the extent to which Becky's social maneuverability depends on Thackeray's representation of her hands.

As I intend to demonstrate, the partial invisibility of Becky's hands is a deliberate and fundamental aspect of *Vanity Fair's* thematic and formal design. That is, for her subversive gestures to have social efficacy, they must be both observable and camouflaged. Drawing on the work of body theorists who discuss the ways that social values are anatomized in unremarkable attributes of physical bearing,<sup>2</sup> I show how the indeterminacy of Becky's manual gesture allows her to perform subordinate social actions while still asserting individual agency. Since her gestures fulfill social obligation yet contain sublimated aggression, Becky's hand constitutes one of the few sites where Victorian hierarchies can be contested, destabilized, and even inverted. Her hand is so frequently the object of Thackeray's narrative and pictorial attention in *Vanity Fair* not merely because it was a central topic of popular discourse<sup>3</sup> in the 1840s, but also because it provides a dynamic location for the novel's overarching concern with the physical and psychic foundations of social control.

In her influential argument that synecdochal representations of the female body fetishize culturally-selected body parts, Helena Michie notes how "Victorian novels are frequently about women's hands" (98). Whereas Michie emphasizes the chain of synecdoche in which hands "stand for hearts," my focus here will be on how Becky's hands function as a substantial source of anxiety in their own right (98).<sup>4</sup> In the past two and a half decades we have become familiar with the notion that nineteenth-century female authors employed a wide range of tactics to obscure but not obliterate their most subversive impulses (Gilbert and Gubar 74). While I would not go so far as to claim that *Vanity Fair* earns Thackeray the designation as "the first social regenerator of the day,"<sup>5</sup> his treatment of Becky's hands nonetheless reveals the extent to which he participated in his culture's debate about gendered spheres.<sup>6</sup> Becky's manual activity also demonstrates how threatening woman's agency was for Thackeray even as he sought to contest the rigidity of Victorian gender ideology in his fiction. As I will show, Thackeray locates power and control in the female hand at a time when the other Victorian novelists attributed similar authority only to men.<sup>7</sup>

## II

In so far as *Vanity Fair* may be seen as a novel about how international war is transported from the battlefield to the drawing room, it is not surprising that Becky's manual dexterity is never far removed from a sense of military precision. One of her first "moves" occurs at the outset of the novel when she applies "ever so gentle a pressure" to Jos Sedley's hand on a public stage, in front of the watchful eyes of the host family she hopes to join via marriage (26). The specific "move" the narrator refers to, here, occurs when Becky initiates contact with Jos's hand in the drawing room at the moment he attempts to apologize for serving a spicy Indian dish at a Sedley family dinner:

'By Gad, Miss Rebecca I wouldn't hurt you for the world.'

'No,' said she, 'I *know* you wouldn't,' and then she gave him ever so gentle a pressure with her little hand, and drew it back quite frightened and looked just for one instant in his face, and then down at the carpet-roads, and I am not prepared to say that Joe's heart did not thump at this little involuntary, timid, gentle motion of regard on the part of the simple girl. (26)

It is important to acknowledge the social context of the scene in order to appreciate the transgressiveness of Becky's seemingly innocuous gesture. She is already holding Jos's hand but decides to apply "ever so gentle a pressure" on a public stage, in front of the watchful eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Sedley (the host family she hopes to join). Yet she is trying to win a husband and a life beyond governessing without the aid of a family—the most important criterion in the arrangement of Victorian marriages. Under these circumstances, Becky has few verbal options and even fewer physical ones with which to display romantic interest.<sup>8</sup> The conversation is politely limited to remarks about food and family while the opportunities for proper physical contact between genders occur only in fleeting salutations.

Becky's hand squeeze, her "gentle motion of regard," is socially acceptable because it is simultaneously aggressive and indecipherable. Its physical pressure partakes of both body and language as it supplements language with an ephemeral materiality that belies the gesture's radical assertiveness. The "move" takes on increasing significance considering the ample space Thackeray's narrator devotes to it, especially in comparison to the instantaneousness of the original gesture. Immediately following Becky's fleeting transgression, the narrator launches into a lengthy paragraph in which he meditates on the audacity of Becky's maneuver:

It was an advance and as such perhaps some ladies of indisputable correctness and gentility will condemn the action as immodest—but you see poor Rebecca had all this work to do for herself. If a person is too poor to keep a servant, though ever so elegant, he must sweep his own rooms; if a dear girl has no mamma to settle matters with the young man, she must do it for herself. And oh what a mercy it is that these women do not exercise their own power oftener. We can't resist them if they do. Let them show ever so little inclination and men go down on their knees at once, old or ugly it is all the same. And this I set down as a positive truth. A woman with fair opportunities and without an absolute hump, may marry WHOM SHE LIKES. Only let us be thankful that the darlings are like the beasts of the field, and don't know their own power. They would overcome us entirely if they did. (26-27)

For all of its complicated irony, the narrator's response to Becky's first maneuver highlights a pattern of increasing threat generated by her status as a "double" outsider. She is not only female, but also poor. Thus the narrator's euphemistic yet protracted evasion of the physical act itself establishes a tone of mock-epic warfare, which has substantive implications for the rest of the narrative. Critics traditionally identify this passage as an example of the narrator's ploy to affirm a sense of male supremacy with his male readers (see Jadwin 670). But even at this early stage in the novel, the narrator seems suspiciously uncomfortable with his own ironic revelation that the barriers between traditional male power structures and female subordination may rest only upon social heterodoxy and "polite manners."

There is surely a "sleight of tongue," as Peter Shillingsburg calls it, in the narrator's observation that it is "a mercy [. . .] women do not exercise their power oftener" (75). The "threat" that men "go down on their knees" in the face of female assertiveness seems overstated in its early context—especially after Jos elects to return to India rather than pursue a life with Becky. However, the threat of such agency becomes more real (and narratologically realized) at the moment Thackeray depicts Sir Pitt Crawley's pathetic proposal in both prose and illustration:

"Say yes, Becky," Sir Pitt continued [. . .] "you shall have what you like; spend what you like; and 'av it all your own way. I'll make you a zettlement. I'll do everything reglar [. . .]" and the old man fell down on his knees and leered at her like a satyr. (152)



Here, the baronet is literally “on his knees,” fulfilling the narrator’s half-serious projection following Becky’s original squeeze to Jos’s hand.<sup>9</sup> Given the association the narrator makes between the power residing in the smallest female gesture and sexual “inclination,” Crawley’s prostrate leer in this scene should also direct us to re-evaluate earlier contact between the young governess and her employer. For example, Thackeray’s illustration of the first meeting between Becky and the elder Crawley contains visual referents which serve to conflate Becky’s manual and sexual assertiveness in ways that parallel the opening encounter with Jos:



The illustration depicts the moment when Mrs. Tinker (the charwoman) returns from an errand to find the new governess and the baronet amidst a manual embrace. Becky’s facial expression reveals her disdain that Tinker has interrupted the private encounter. Furthermore, Becky is leading her aristocratic employer through his *own* house only moments after meeting him for the first time. Judith Fisher has drawn attention to the ways in which Thackeray creates “intratextual narrative irony” through inconsistencies in written and illustrated events in *Vanity Fair* (65). If we combine the alternating perspectives the narrator gives us up to this point, though, the importance of Becky’s hands in her campaign to rise in society becomes more clear. In the Jos scene, the narrator discusses the details of Becky’s hand squeeze without illustration. With the elder Crawley, the narrator refrains from telling us of Becky’s specific maneuvers, but the illustrations—including the hyper-literal rendition of Crawley’s proposal—confirm her ability to transform polite physical contact into social leverage. In this sense, Thackeray uses Becky’s hand to register the sexual strategies that his readership and her gender largely

forbid. Focusing on Becky's hands also complicates Arnold Kettle's general observation that Becky "uses consciously and systematically all the men's weapons plus her one natural asset, her sex, to storm the men's world" (164). The hand would never be considered a "natural asset" of the female sex, yet Becky nevertheless uses hers more subtly to storm the men's world in *Vanity Fair*.

The Victorian fascination with disguised sexuality can be seen most clearly in Thackeray's treatment of the interaction between Becky and George Osborne.<sup>10</sup> The specific tension arises from the role George plays in foiling Becky's attempt to marry Jos. From both a class and gender perspective, therefore, one of Becky's most interesting maneuvers occurs when she encounters Osborne shortly after settling for a position as a governess. Thackeray embeds the illustration within his narrative representation as if to announce the importance of the scene. His placement of the illustration *within* the narrative arrests the reader in the heady moment just before the handshake:

Miss Sharp put out her right fore-finger—



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And gave him a little nod, so cool and so killing, that Rawdon Crawley, watching the operations from the other room, could hardly restrain his laughter as he saw the lieutenant's entire discomfiture. (148)

Critics of Victorian illustration seldom miss an opportunity to point out Thackeray's deficiencies as a visual artist. Regarding this particular illustration, John Harvey cites Osborne's "wooden body" as evidence that Thackeray "has not 'seen' the incident at all, but is merely making a kind of hesitant visual guess" (80). Harvey further suggests that an illustration "in the style of John Leech" would be more desirable for such a dramatic scene (80). I wish to focus on this illustration precisely *because* of what Harvey objects to as inferior artistry, though. It is true that George appears wooden and unnatural; but this is the way that Thackeray depicts him in the prose that literally surrounds the illustration. I want to suggest George's awkwardness is not attributable to a deficiency in Thackeray's draftsmanship. His visible discomfort is the result of the *politeness* of Becky's aggressiveness—an idea Thackeray brilliantly emphasizes by locating the illustration of her pointed fore-finger directly beneath the textual dash introducing it (148). Thackeray's "intra-text" here forms what J. Hillis Miller, in another context, calls a "permanent parabasis, an eternal moment suspending [. . .] any attempt to tell a story through time" (60).

George is frozen in the middle of the routine social ritual, but it is critical for my argument that Becky asserts control of this interaction within the boundaries of propriety. As the illustration indicates, George is shocked by Becky's manual audacity and his surprise is registered in his entire ("wooden") body. The angle of his torso, the placement of his foot, and the direction of his open hand and fingers all suggest that he expects a measure of physical deference from the seated governess. George assumes that his social superiority will automatically grant him what Michael Curtin calls "the right of recognition" (81). Contemporary etiquette books articulate that it is George's decision—as a member of the higher class—whether or not to acknowledge Becky with a handshake. The prose immediately preceding the illustration makes this explicit:

[George] walked up to Rebecca with a patronizing, easy swagger. He was going to be kind to her and protect her. He would even shake hands with her, as a friend of Amelia's; and saying, 'Ah, Miss Sharp! How-dy-doo?'



held out his left hand towards her, expecting that she would be quite confounded at the honour. (147)<sup>11</sup>

When Becky counters with her right forefinger, Thackeray gives us a verbal rendition of George's discomfiture by describing "the start he gave, the pause, and the perfect clumsiness with which he at length condescended to take the finger which was offered for his embrace" (148).

### III

By the middle of the century, etiquette literature had begun to acknowledge the importance of the salutation for both women and men. In response to what James Eli Adams has recently termed the "crises of interpretation" resulting from the rapidly expanding boundaries of social intercourse, authors of etiquette books began to devote entire sections to the adumbration of proper hand behavior in public settings (52). One contemporary manual commented that "no idiosyncrasy of character [was] more important than the manner of salutation" (Simms 388). "As is the salutation," the chapter begins, "so is the total of the character" (388). Another popular etiquette book asserted that "the charm of the hand, as a saluting member, lies in the fact of its grasping power, which enables the shaker to vary the salute" in accordance with class discrepancies (*Habits* 324). The focus on the hand in Victorian "access rituals" also parallels the culture's more general preoccupation with the connection between hands and individual identity. Richard Beamish's 1843 work entitled *The Psychonomy of the Hand*, for example, includes thirty-one "illustrative tracings from living hands" upon which readers are encouraged to identify their own hand shapes (title page).<sup>12</sup>

Given the contemporary surge of popular interest in the hand, the specificity with which Thackeray treats this introduction between George and Becky merits additional consideration. The designation of the left and right hands is a small but critical detail. George's original decision to offer his left hand in the shake gives manual expression to his general condescension toward the female governess. Etiquette books stressed the universal fact that the right hand was to be used *always* in handshakes—even when one offered the fingers alone. Becky's determination to counter George's left hand with only her right forefinger thus reflects a conscious choice on her part as well. She might have easily offered her left hand to George's left hand, a move that would have challenged both his classed and gendered arrogance. Becky's offering of her *right* forefinger, however, has the effect of inducing an embarrassing anatomical awkwardness because of the simple fact that fingers alone

cannot embrace each other gracefully. Furthermore, the slackness apparent in George's finger placement is met with Becky's aggressively pointed single finger so that both the prose and the illustration partake of the parry-and-thrust movement characteristically associated with the (aristocratic) male institution of the duel.

The narrator informs us how jarring George finds his first experience of a botched public handshake: "George was quite savage. The little governess patronized him and *persiffléd* him until this young British Lion felt quite uneasy [. . .] Thus, was George utterly routed" (149, Thackeray's emphasis). It is important to point out that the terms of this "rout" are gestural, even as they draw support from the facial and the verbal. Becky's impassive facial expression denies what her hand intends and, in fact, achieves. The discrepancy between the actions of the hands and the faces is what brings irony to the scene (and a blush to George's face). Furthermore, the portrait on the wall above Becky instructs the viewer to notice the hand by prominently concealing it—all while the painting's face observes the encounter below. This interchange also marks an important stage in the development of Becky's escalating, but still "permissible," aggressiveness. Her delicate hand-squeeze at the outset of the novel proved too light to win Jos Sedley at least in part because of George's intervention. The pointed finger here, then, reflects Becky's desire to revenge George's role in her foiled attempt to marry Jos, but it also hints at the violence her hand is capable of performing in the role of Clytemnestra and beyond.

As Maria DiBattista and Lisa Jadwin have usefully discussed, a woman in Becky's position had few options to exercise self-assertiveness, especially in a drawing room full of people where she could quickly become the subject of damaging negative attention. She may, however, defend and even assert herself gesturally while maintaining an otherwise cordial conversation. In this sense, Becky's right-handed gesture offers her an acceptable para-linguistic mode through which she can contest traditional Victorian gender politics; where the hand operates as a powerful, but camouflaged, sexual and social appendage. It becomes the primary physical agent in the battle for social advantage that Norbert Elias and Erving Goffman refer to as "impression management." The anatomical maladroitness created by George's left and Becky's right fingers suggests a refutation of the lock-and-key model of heterosexual contact, thereby implicitly debunking the politics of sexual determinism. Directed as it is to the concave posture of George's mid-section, Becky's aggressively pointed finger resembles a visual analogy of the phallus of which his body positioning deprives him. Even the inversion of gender codes represented in this scene must be masked by congeniality, though.

The verbal and facial depictions of the event suggest a *circuit* of propriety, but crucially, a circuit that diverts the current of attention away from problematic discourses which remain latent in the gestural. In this way, the decorous facial and conversational aspects of the scene exist to repress the physical and sexual energies of the hand. And yet the Victorians were fascinated by the hand, precisely because through its movements they could illustrate if not articulate the disavowed discourses (manual labor, sexuality, gender insurrection) that were so often the batteries of middle-class anxiety.

Viewed in light of previous interactions with Jos and Sir Pitt Crawley, the scene suggests how Becky's manual dexterity prompts a desire that men find difficult to resist but that polite women also cannot detect. Becky's aggressiveness, as deflating as it is for George, generates within him a lustful desire to pursue her sexually. We know from the novel's early chapters that George and Becky meet during Jos's short-lived courtship but George, at that time, appears content with his fiancée Amelia. After the scene discussed above, however, George boldly pursues a sexual relationship with Becky. He confides in Rawdon that Becky is "a sharp one," "a dangerous one," and most revealingly, "a desperate flirt" on the day following Becky's manual "rout" (149). Far from being put off by Becky's actions, George quickly experiences sexual exhilaration. The narrator describes George as "throbbing with triumph and excitement" at the ball in Brussels where he secretly asks Becky to run away with him despite his one-week-old marriage to Amelia (290). Martha Vicinus, Carol Christ and others have suggested that Victorian males tended to resolve their ambivalence vis-à-vis sexuality and aggression by idealizing feminine passivity in the domestic "angel" (Vicinus xviii). However, the opposite seems to be true in *Vanity Fair*. George comes to dislike Amelia's passive (and perhaps asexual) nature most at exactly those moments when it is juxtaposed with Becky's sexually-charged hands.

Indeed, Amelia's manual submissiveness seems to act as an extension of her deferential personality in general. At the moment George leaves for the war from which he will never return, for example, the narrator focuses our attention not on Amelia's sleeping face, but on the innocence of her hand: "God bless her! God bless her! He came to the bedside, and looked at the hand, the little soft hand, lying asleep" (292). In a scene that parallels but inverts many of the aspects of George's farewell to Amelia's sleeping hand, the young Rawdon Crawley enters his mother's room hoping for affection but finds appropriately only a "mystic bronze hand on the dressing-table, glistening all over with a hundred rings" (380). In this sense, George's attraction to Becky reflects more of

Simone de Beauvoir's notion that men project ideals of woman that they themselves would like in some way to possess or incorporate. Though this is no doubt inflected by the virgin/whore dichotomy where the latter becomes alluring despite or because of the former's idealization, George's sudden attraction to Becky may also be seen as an attempt to recuperate the sense of masculine authority that he lost in the salutation scene.

After her encounter with George, Becky recognizes that she possesses the ability to transform innocuous social rituals into combative gestures—ones in which she is able to scramble traditional notions of class and gender without the consequences of doing so “openly.” The parry-and-thrust movement of Becky's hands inaugurates a pattern of behavior on which she relies even while operating under the most extreme social scrutiny. For example, during her first official visit to the Marquis de Steyne's Gaunt House estate, Becky finds herself “attacked” by high-ranking guests of both genders. But Thackeray describes her simultaneously aggressive and polite responses to these attacks as physical rather than verbal in nature. “The younger ladies of the House of Gaunt,” the narrator tells us, “set people at [Becky], but they failed” (505). In the same paragraph we learn that “the brilliant Lady Stunington tried a passage of arms with her, but was routed with great slaughter by the intrepid little Becky” (505). Perhaps most interesting in light of George's earlier fate, Mr. Wagg is called upon to vanquish Becky when her deft conversational skills prove unflappable:

Mr. Wagg, the celebrated wit, and a led captain and trencher-man of my Lord Steyne, was caused by the ladies to charge [Becky]; and the worthy fellow, leering at his patronesses, and giving them a wink, as much as to say, “Now look out for sport,”—one evening began an assault upon Becky, who was unsuspectingly eating her dinner. The little woman, attacked on a sudden but never without arms, lighted up in an instant, parried and reposted with a home-thrust, which made Wagg's face tingle with shame. (506)

Like the Osborne salutation scene, Becky's aggressiveness is figured manually, but, in this instance, Thackeray provides no corresponding illustration. Therefore, the emphasis becomes focused on the combination of Becky's verbal and gestural agency. In the Osborne scene, the fear of sight was figured metaphorically in the determinative character of the hand in the illustration. With the Wagg scene, though, the fact that we do

not *see* a representation of the interaction only serves to increase the threat of feminine intractability. This is partly because the reader is prompted to envision such an image anyway—having previously “read” about a similar event in the dual mediums of prose and image in the Osborne tableau. As W. J. T. Mitchell has keenly observed, “the very idea of an ‘idea’ is bound up with the notion of imagery” once we see it with our eyes (5).

Once we see Becky’s combative hands in the George Osborne illustration, the image persists in other contexts. At Gaunt House, even though the physical has become the visual sphere of reference, Becky’s activity is rendered verbally, but still crucially, in the metaphor of manual combat that we observed with George Osborne. So powerful is this referent as an index of social leverage that Becky’s dueling hand actually replaces what we could assume would be the antagonistic content of adjacent conversations. The combative dialogue between Becky and Wagg thus becomes truly heteroglossic, as it registers with extreme subtlety the “tiniest shifts and oscillations of the social atmosphere” (300). The larger consequence of this focus on Becky’s hands, even when they are not illustrated, is that the gestural assumes a place of primacy in Becky’s social confrontations. They retain their function symbolically, as regulators or “channels of power” in Mary Douglas’s theory of ritual (111-112). The declarative discourse Becky is forbidden to use is articulated through a uniquely acceptable but potent manual discourse, adding perhaps an additional dimension to Elaine Showalter’s formulation of “genderlect” (254). Becky’s gestural “language” in such a lexicon is able to thrive in a place that is not overpopulated—in the Bakhtinian sense—with male intentionality precisely because it simultaneously challenges and adheres to conventional codes of social conduct.

#### IV

There is also an important formal relationship between Becky’s manual activity and Thackeray’s narrative strategy in *Vanity Fair*. Just as Becky calibrates her aggressiveness to the codes of Victorian propriety, the narrator-showman boasts of his ability to present the novel’s sordid plot in a “perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner” (637). “Above the water-line,” the narrator challenges us to consider, “has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous?” (638). What Wolfgang Iser calls the “guiding sovereignty” of the narrator’s manipulative tone, of course, stems from his claim to be the sole “Manager” of *Vanity Fair*’s complicated marionette production (54). The puppetry motif is as functional as it is aesthetic for Thackeray, though. The work of George Speaight and

John McCormick has shown that the popularity of the marionette grew rapidly during the Victorian period—a fact that would not have escaped Thackeray's attention, given his keen interest in the tangled pathways of social power.

Perhaps more importantly, the marionette draws attention to Thackeray's fascination with the origins and modalities of social control. Like the indeterminacy encoded in Becky's manual behavior and the manager's narration, the generic imperative of the marionette is to expose and conceal simultaneously. It animates doll figures with human movement from a hidden place above the stage and, therefore, depends as much on what is seen by the audience as on what is unseen. Thus the parallel relationship between Becky's "discernable" propriety and the narrator's withholding style is pivotal. Amidst the entangling relationships which Thackeray sees as characteristic of nineteenth-century English society, the authority of the smug narrator-showman, as with Osborne and Wagg, is constantly under siege by Becky's threatening but socially acceptable appropriation of the novel's "leading-strings" (679).

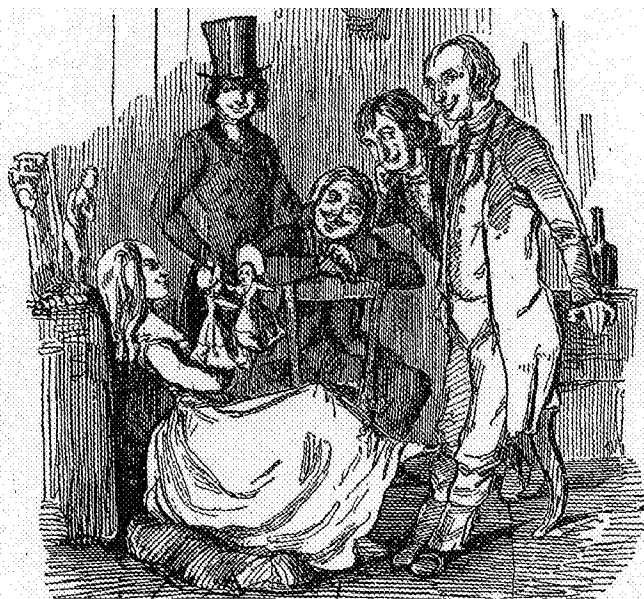
It is an overwhelming critical consensus that Thackeray "added" the verbal and pictorial puppet to the first and last sections of *Vanity Fair* in his preparation of the final double number in June 1848. The resoluteness with which Joan Stevens makes this argument characterizes the almost universal agreement among critics since 1965:

Puppetry [. . .] is not emphasized in either words or illustrations until the very end of the novel [. . .] it does not appear in the text until the last sentence of book; it appears in "Before the Curtain," written at the same time; the only illustrations embodying the idea are those in the cluster of three drawn, also at the end, for the decoration of the final double Number. (394-95)

In part from Eyre Evans Crowe's recollection of a discussion with Thackeray,<sup>13</sup> Stevens concludes that "*only* in June 1848, while he was working on the sheets of Numbers 19 and 20, did Thackeray realise the usefulness of the puppet show for his purpose" (396, emphasis added).

The narratological complexity of the novel is the result of the way characters in *Vanity Fair*'s society manipulate each other even while they are themselves subject to the literal manipulation of the Manager of the Performance. Throughout the novel, not only in the 1848 material, frequent interchanges between the roles of puppet and puppet master form an important part of Thackeray's view of English social culture. In such a society, control is always part of an illusion that conflates seemingly op-

posite subject positions of puppet and puppet master. Like Wolfgang Iser, Roger Wilkenfeld claims that “the Manager of the puppet-show is its sole proprietor and manipulator” (317). While this is true to a certain literal extent, my contention is that Becky challenges this authority by taking over the controlling “hand” of the puppet-master at crucial junctures in the narrative. More specifically, Becky’s dramatic strength, as I see it, lies in her manipulative performance of the control she seizes. We learn of Becky’s affinity for manipulation very early in the novel when Thackeray depicts her verbally and pictorially as she entertains the men of the artist’s quarter with her hands:



Here, only thirteen pages into the novel, Thackeray provides a convincing introduction to Becky’s career as a puppet master. Stevens argues that this illustration “pictures ordinary dolls, not puppets” (395). While they are not marionettes in the definitive sense, they are also not ordinary “dolls” as the prose suggests. The illustration shows Becky’s hands controlling the puppets’ movements from the *inside* of the dolls, her fingers clearly operating the movement of the figures’ heads and arms. This detail also hints at the performance-based dexterity that Becky later calls upon to enthrall the charade audience in her role as Clytemnestra—a scene which locates the threat of violence in her dagger-clutching hand most vividly. Still, the movement from puppet to puppet master in this

early scene reveals the deceptive nature of control in the social realm. The person who seeks control, as the narrator and Becky both do, is also subject to control by others in different circumstances.

The threat embodied in Becky's controlling hand achieves its greatest prominence in the final scene of *Vanity Fair's* first number. Jos and Becky are left alone in the drawing room shortly after Becky has performed her first hand-squeezing maneuver at the Sedley dinner. In the prose rendition of the scene, Thackeray reports that the "shining needles" of Becky's knitting "were quivering rapidly under her white slender fingers" as she completes the silk purse (36). The following is Thackeray's depiction of the exchange between Becky and Jos:

"I must finish the purse. Will you help me, Mr. Sedley?"  
And before he had time to ask how, Mr. Joseph Sedley, of the East India Company's service, was actually seated *tête-à-tête* with a young lady, looking at her with a most killing expression; his arms stretched out before her in an imploring attitude, and his hands bound in a web of green silk, which she was unwinding. (36)

The illustration of this number-ending "*tête-à-tête*" is missing several of the scene's most crucial props, though. This discrepancy is a representative example of what Judith Law Fisher calls the "interpretive collision" between the verbal and the visual in Thackeray's fiction (70). The prose and the illustration are consistent in so far as they depict Jos with his arms stretched out before Becky in an imploring attitude ("doing his best to make a killing expression") while George and Amelia look on from outside the room. The "shining needles" that were quivering rapidly under Becky's fingers in Thackeray's prose are entirely absent from the illustration entitled "Mr. Joseph entangled" (36-37):





Oddly absent as well is Becky's skein of silk, an object the narrator assures us was "wound around the card" in his prose description (36). Thus, what we have is not a representation of Becky "unwinding" the green silk, but instead an illustrated scene which gives us decidedly more information about Becky's hands than the prose does on its own. In what is perhaps Thackeray's most famous full-page illustration, Becky is shown not only holding but also controlling the two ends of string as it binds Jos's hands. She is holding the two ends of the string independently, but her raised hand suggests movement in a way that shows Jos's hands *controlled* rather than "entangled."

Unlike the weaving motion employed by the knitter of Thackeray's prose, Becky appears to be pulling the silk back and forth in the manner of a puppeteer—an act that shifts the focus decidedly from "*tête-à-tête*" to *main-à-main*. The controlling effect not only on the hapless Jos, but also on the rest of the novel's plot, underscores the thematic and narrative convergence of Becky's social manipulation. In this sense, Becky's hands allow her to move swiftly and simultaneously beyond her narratively-inscribed position as a marionette *and* her ideologically-assigned role as a woman.

The gendered relation of the puppet to the controlling hand is all the more compelling considering how Victorian puppet showmen—and

they were most often men—were called simply “manipulators” by their contemporaries. The scene incorporates an additional realistic detail from the material world of the marionette stage: puppets were controlled by green strings because of the color’s supposed invisibility on a variety of multi-colored background staging. Acknowledging this feature, the non-aggressive and almost exclusively female activity of Becky’s knitting becomes invisibly encoded in feminine gesture not only above and below the surface of polite social discourse, but also more subversively, embroidered *within* it.

It seems fair to conclude—at least tentatively—that Thackeray’s construction of *Vanity Fair* is part of a larger critique of power in the social sphere. Let me now probe that tentativeness by looking specifically at the novel’s 1848 title page, which Thackeray produced after completing the novel:

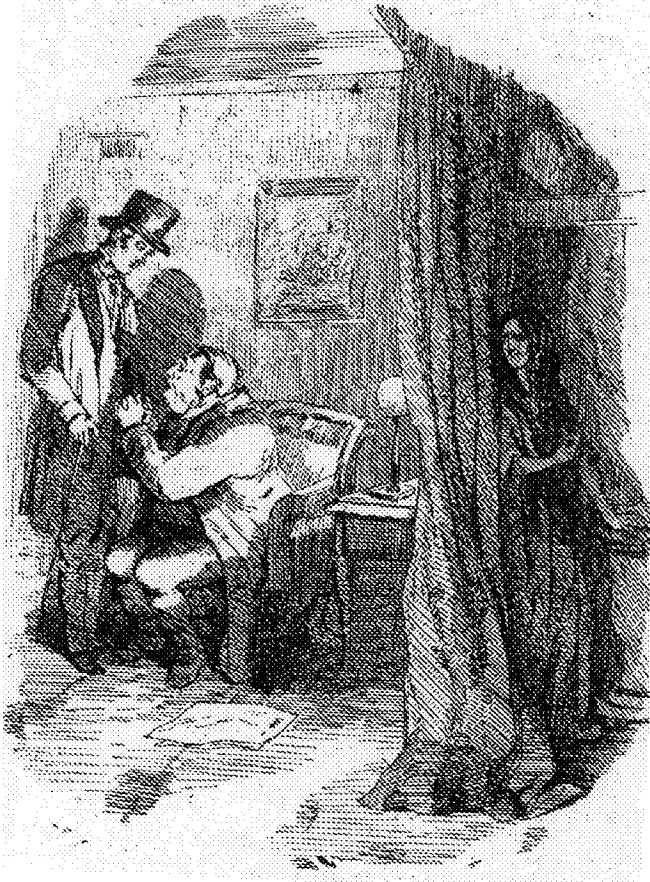


Thackeray’s puppet-box illustrations (title page and tail-piece) have prompted readings that diminish Becky’s place in the narrative to that of a literal puppet—easily shut up and dismissed.<sup>14</sup> At first glance, the new title page seems to support such readings. The proportionality of the illustration emphasizes the psychosocial habit of thought that links the puppet, the doll, and the woman in an implicit hierarchy of representational and social subordination. Becky’s general diminution reinforces

the manipulability that the narrator identifies as making her so “uncommonly flexible in the joints and lively on the wire” (xvi).

The similarity between Becky’s behavior and the narrator’s puppetry adds thematic depth and formal coherence to the complex struggle for control in *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray’s employment of the mirror-wielding narrator has been widely discussed elsewhere. Less attention, however, has been paid to the object next to the narrator, which I contend reveals the dynamism and potency of Becky’s hands. While the manager looks at himself in the mirror, the Becky puppet reaches her arm in the direction of the crossed wood by her side. Critics traditionally identify the crossed wood at the narrator’s side as one of two logical possibilities: as either a toy sword or a marionette control bar.<sup>15</sup> Interpretations of the former undoubtedly comply with the farce of military glory that Thackeray sustains throughout the narrative; the latter becomes an obvious extension of the puppetry motif.

In my reading of Becky’s hands, though, it is crucial to consider the ways in which the sword and the control bar are *not* mutually exclusive. They are actually psychic and physical corollaries for Thackeray. The violent defense of one’s self interests and the puppet master’s abrogation of another’s selfhood are at bottom merely different expressions of the same basic impulse to gain social leverage. Thus Becky’s hand at the end of the novel is as equally *indistinguishable* from manipulative control as it is from physical violence. In fact, what we might call Becky’s “manipulative violence” reaches its highest dramatic pitch with Thackeray’s illustration of her “second appearance” as Clytemnestra in the closing pages of the novel:



Here, the hand's nearly imperceptible transformation from an instrument of mock-epic warfare (with Jos, Osborne, and Wagg) to an agent of physical violence reveals the aggressiveness latent in nineteenth-century social interaction.<sup>16</sup> Whether or not Becky actually murders Jos is secondary if not irrelevant. More important is Thackeray's depiction of the violent nature of Becky's control over Jos—where she appears capable of using violence as a means to gain ultimate control.

The collapsing of the combative into the dramatic in the marionette sword / paddle reveals *Vanity Fair's* preoccupation with the controlling influence of Becky's hands. The placement of the control mechanism *between* the Becky doll and the Manager in the Title Page is emblematic of a larger narrative tension, but its crossed shape is also crucial to the escalating violence located in Becky's previous maneuvers. Her mock-heroic

squeeze of Jos's hand in the opening number gives way to fingers that act like miniature swords even in the most tightly regulated drawing room encounters. The threat of violence surrounding insurrectionary women, of course, is literalized in her hand during both of Becky's appearances as Clytemnestra. Thus as Becky reaches for the crossed wood on the title page—whether it is viewed as a sword, a marionette paddle, or a combination of both—she is reaching for control which, in *Vanity Fair*, is always an entangling mixture of individual aggression and social propriety. If we may follow Foucault's reasoning that power is essentially a *form* of manipulation, it matters less which threatening device Becky actually holds, because both the sword and the marionette paddle are ultimately only extensions of her resourceful hands. Indeed, Becky knows that the power to manipulate social circumstances is never far removed from the hands that perform such maneuvers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a brilliant exception to this general trend, see William A. Cohen's "Manual Conduct in *Great Expectations*," in *Sex Scandal*.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of *habitus* has been particularly useful. In *Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu notes how social values are 'made body' through seemingly innocuous details of physical bearing. Bourdieu's notion that social values become invisible as acts of culture is central to my interpretation of how Becky's hands operate in *Vanity Fair*.

<sup>3</sup> Key texts include Sir Charles Bell's *The Hand* (1833), Richard Beamish's *The Psychonomy of the Hand* (1843 and 1865), and the anonymously published *The Hand Phrenologically Considered* (1848).

<sup>4</sup> I see Michie's interpretation as one of several excellent discussions of the body that treat the Victorian hand in its metonymic or synecdochic, rather than its physical, form. Other texts include Bruce Robbins's *The Servant's Hand* (1993) and Patricia Johnson's *Hidden Hands* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> The phrase is Charlotte Brontë's, from the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (December 1847).

<sup>6</sup> For book-length studies treating the subject of Thackeray's "feminism," see Barickman, et al., *Corrupt Relations*, Thomas, *Thackeray and Slavery*, and Clarke, *Thackeray and Women* (1995).

<sup>7</sup> See Lisa Surridge's *Bleak Houses* (2005) for an analysis of male-perpetrated domestic violence in *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Domby and Son* (1846-8), and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), among other Victorian novels. I view Becky as an archetypal

figure for Dickens's later figuration of class and gender anxiety in Molly's violent hands (*Great Expectations*).

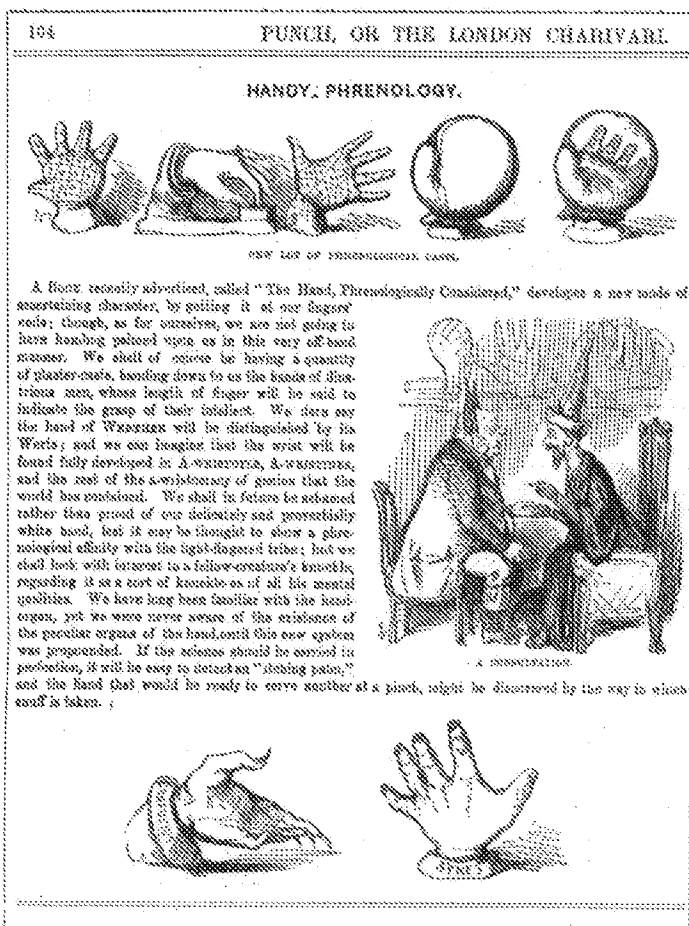
<sup>8</sup> As James Phelan has noted from rhetorical and feminist viewpoints, *Vanity Fair* "offers a powerful indictment of courtship behavior in [its] male-controlled society" (139).

<sup>9</sup> I interpret *Vanity Fair*'s illustrations to be unique for the reason that Thackeray was the creator of both text and image, maintaining full control over his illustrations and their placement in the text. Thackeray remains the single major English novelist to illustrate his own works (despite his use of commissioned illustrators for some of his fiction after *Pendennis*). As a result, there is no conflation of intentionality as there is with, say, Dickens and his various illustrators. My position in this regard is far from new; I join a long list of Thackerayans beginning with Henry Kingsley who believe that the illustrations are the "key to the text" (Kingsley 360).

<sup>10</sup> My phrasing comes from Alexander Welsh's treatment of sexual themes in *The City of Dickens* (154-55).

<sup>11</sup> Jadwin briefly identifies this scene as an example of Becky's rhetorical "double-discourse." Though it is true that Becky inflects her "diction with just enough exaggeration to telegraph her disapproval" underneath the "deferential surface of her utterance" (665), I maintain that the manual activity in the scene is at least as significant as the verbal. Jadwin comes closest to my argument regarding a specifically manual discourse when she asserts that Becky's "trap" mode is "characteristically sub-linguistic—minimalistic or even silent—and often takes the form of a series of standard, theatricalized gestures or poses calculated to generate a certain response" (665).

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting the period's popular interest in the hand beyond etiquette literature. In 1848, Chapman and Hall published a book by an anonymous author titled *The Hand Phrenologically Considered*. It was the popularity of this book that prompted *Punch*'s satirical "Handy Phrenology" article in September 1848:



<sup>13</sup> Eyre Evans Crowe's story of how Thackeray happened upon the idea of puppetry during his composition of the final numbers also remains one of the strongest arguments for critics who maintain that *Vanity Fair's* puppetry is ornamental rather than organic. The following is Crowe's account of the events:

It occurred in June, 1848, one day when Thackeray came at lunch time to my father's house. Torrens McCullaugh, happening to be one of the party, said across the table to Thackeray, "Well, I see you are going to shut up your puppets in their box!" [Thackeray's] immediate reply was, "Yes, and, with your permission, I'll work up that simile." (qtd. in Stevens 396)

<sup>14</sup> See Rawlins, *Thackeray's Novels* (28) and Loofbourow's *Thackeray and the Form of Fiction* (31-32).

<sup>15</sup> See Peters, *Thackeray's Universe* (146) and Wilkenfeld, "'Before the Curtain' and *Vanity Fair*" (308).

<sup>16</sup> The identification of the object in Becky's hand has been the subject of considerably varied critical interpretation. Lougy maintains that Becky is "holding a sinister-looking phial in her hand" (263) while DiBattista observes that Becky's illustrated hand "allows just the suggestion of a poised weapon" (827). I am indebted to Peter Shillingsburg for reminding me of the ambiguities that exist even in the original illustration.

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